

## TREE POSTURE

Vrikshasana

By Richard Rosen

Mind is the seed, Hatha-Yoga is the soil, dispassion (*vairagya*) the water. By these three the tree that fulfills all wishes (*kalpa-vriksha*), which is the state of exaltation (*unmani*), springs forth suddenly.

~Swatmarama, *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*, 4.104.

### INTRODUCTION

The symbol of the Tree has a long history in Indian spiritual literature. In its broadest sense, the Tree symbolizes the cosmos itself, and so stands for totality, completion, and integration. It also often represents the organizing principle or center (or axis) of the world. Unlike everyday trees, this World Tree grows upside down, with its roots digging deep in the "soil" of the Absolute (*brahman*). Its branches represent our mundane world, with its inexhaustible fertility and endless cycle of transmigration from birth to death and rebirth again, what the yogis call "wandering through" (*samsara*).

Each of us also compared to a "tree of the forest" (*Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.28) growing from the Absolute:

His hairs are leaves,  
His skin the outer bark.

His pieces of flesh are under-layers of wood.  
The fibre is muscle-like, strong.  
The bones are the wood within.  
The marrow is made resembling pith.

Drawing on this rich traditional symbolism, B.K.S. Iyengar likens the growth of a Tree from seed to maturity to the "spiritual development of the human being" (115; all quotes are from *The Tree of Yoga*). The "seed" of the individual, he writes, is the soul, "within which the essence of our being is hidden" (115). He also compares the parts of the Tree to the eight "limbs" (*anga*) of the classical practice: the roots are five ethical observances (*yama*), while the trunk the five self-restrictions (*niyama*); *asanas* are the branches and *pranayama* the leaves; sensory absorption (*pratyahara*) is the bark; concentration (*dharana*) is the sap or "juice which flows within the branches and the trunk . . . towards the root" (63), meditation (*dhyana*) the flower, and the eighth limb, *samadhi* or self-understanding, the fruit.

### BENEFITS

Tree Posture will strengthen your legs and ankles, open your groins and shoulders, improve your sense of balance, and develop your ability to concentrate.

### BEGINNING PRACTICE

For the beginning practice you'll need to start by leaning back against your yoga wall as you did for Mountain Posture (*tadasana*). Again make sure there aren't any pictures (or other wall decorations) hanging nearby. Stand your heels about 3 to 6 centimeters away from the wall, feet together, and spread your toes wide. Feel how the wall presses your shoulder blades firmly against your back ribs, which helps to boost the top of the sternum upward, opening your chest.

Now squeeze your outer thighs inward against the thigh bones—imagine that you are “sharpening” the “seams” down the sides of your legs. Be sure though that, as you do this, your belly stays soft. Root the bases of the big toes and the inner heels firmly into the floor. Then lean forward and, with your hands, stroke along the “circuits” of the legs. First release the pelvic energy away from the sacrum and *down* the outer legs from the hips to the heels; then lift the Earth energy *up* the inner legs from the ankles to the groins. Repeat several times, until you have a clear sense of these circuits, then lift your torso upright again. Watch the Earth energy ascend along your inner legs, and when it reaches the inner groins, imagine that it continues through the “core” of your torso and neck, through the head (between the halves of the brain), and out the crown of your head at what the yogis call the “door of Brahma” (*brahma-randhra*). This energy circuit, which follows the “front” of your spine as it passes through the torso, is the true subtle “heart” of your body, the World Tree of your little cosmos.

Inhale and slide your torso across the wall to the right. Stop when the center of your pelvis (perineum) is directly over the middle of your right foot. As you move to the right, be sure to keep your inner right foot in firm contact with the floor. Then bend your left knee, lean slightly forward, and grab your left ankle with your left hand.

Place the sole of your left foot somewhere against the inside of your right leg. It goes without saying that the standing leg is the “trunk” of your Tree, and needs to be very solid to support the posture. If your thighs and groins are flexible, snug the left heel into the hollow of your inner right groin. Press the sole against the inner thigh and point the toes straight toward the floor. If you’re less flexible though, position the foot lower on the inner leg, somewhere on the thigh, the knee, or even the calf. Then over time in your asana practice, work to stretch the thighs and groins so that you can bring the foot higher and higher on the opposite leg. Actively contract the muscles on the right front thigh to lift the knee cap. As you did just before, squeeze the outer right leg strongly against the thigh bone, and resist this pressure by pushing the left foot just as strongly against the inner thigh or calf.

Then lean your back evenly against the wall again. Your bent left leg will probably be angled slightly away from the wall (so that the left knee is forward of the left hip). Resist the temptation to push your left knee back, which will only distort the hips. Rest your hands on your hips and feel the position of the pelvis. It’s possible that your left hip will be slightly higher than your right (so that your pelvis is tilted to the right), and that the front of your pelvis will be tipped slightly forward (so that your tail bone is pushed out and up like a duck’s tail). If this is the case, your Tree is a little crooked and would topple over at the slightest provocation.

So to balance the pelvis and steady your Tree, burrow your left thumb deep into the left groin (in the crease where the thigh joins the pelvis), and rotate skin and flesh of the thigh, like a wheel, from inside to outside. Then push the outer thigh down toward the floor, lengthen your tail bone toward the heels, and press it lightly forward, into your pelvis toward the pubic bone (but without flattening the natural inward curve of your lower back). These actions should help release the left groin and square your pelvis so that your Tree soars majestically upward.

Once you’ve done all this, spread your palms on the wall to either side of your hips and slide your hands toward the floor, extending your arms. Release your shoulder blades down the back torso toward the tail. When you feel ready, inhale, push your

palms against the wall, and on an exhale lift your torso away from the wall by pressing your shoulder blades and tail bone forward. Imagine, at the same time, that your right front thigh is pinned to the wall and resist the forward movement.

Stand for a few seconds, hands on the wall, and feel your Tree's roots dig deep into the planet. From the inner foot draw the Earth energy into the core of the torso and, when it exits through the door of Brahma, watch it cascade downward all around you, helping to ground the back torso and outer legs. Pretend that the wall is still pressing against your back, and continue to move the shoulder blades and tail bone forward, into the torso. Then inhale, open your chest even wider and lift your head up and drop it lightly back against the wall (if there's any tension in the neck or throat, move closer to the wall).

Once your head is braced against the wall, bring your palms together in front of your chest and rest the thumbs on the sternum. This hand position is often called the "Heart Seal" (*hrd-mudra*). Press the palms firmly and evenly into each other and lift the sternum into the thumbs without pushing the lower front ribs forward. Wait for 15 to 20 seconds, breathing smoothly.

Then inhale and, with your palms together, trace a route parallel to the mid-line of your head with your thumbs and stretch your arms up, like the branches of a Tree, toward the ceiling. If you're tighter in the shoulders you may need to bring the hands apart, so that the elevated arms are parallel to each other. But if you are comfortable in the shoulders and neck, continue to press the palms together. Stretch the outer arms upward through the pinkies (as the shoulder blades continue to descend). Start with your hands directly over your head, arms perpendicular to the floor. Again make sure that your lower front ribs aren't jutting forward. Then, if you feel comfortable, bring the thumbs back to the wall by pressing the shoulder blades more deeply into your back.

Look up at your thumbs. Stay for 30 seconds to a minute, breathing lightly through the nose, then exhale, draw your thumbs back to your sternum for a few breaths. Finally release your hands to the wall beside your hips, inhale lift your head, and exhale drop your left foot lightly to the floor. Rest back against the wall, and repeat with the left leg standing and the right leg up for an equal length of time.

### **CONTINUING PRACTICE**

For the continuing practice of Tree, stand away from the wall in Mountain Posture (*tadasana*). Root the inner feet into the floor and establish the powerful upward stream of the subtle heart circuit. Imagine that you are still leaning against the wall, so that your shoulder blades and sacrum firm against your back. Inhale, and as you did in the beginning practice, shift your weight over your right foot and draw the left foot up somewhere against the inner right leg. Bring your hands on your hips and balance the pelvis. Fix your gaze steadily on a point on the floor about 2 meters in front of you. Then join your hands in the Heart Mudra. Try to keep the sole of your right foot evenly pressed against the floor, and use its shifting pressure to adjust your posture. If you feel yourself tilting to the right, squeeze the outer leg inward; if you start to lean to the left, push the left heel more actively into the right leg.

At first it's likely that you won't be able to raise your arms and look up at your thumbs. But gradually, as you learn to stand steadily and comfortably on one leg, practice raising the arms, and then dropping the head back. If you topple over, be sure to smile and congratulate yourself for doing your best. Gradually too, extend

your stay in the posture, to anywhere from 1 to 3 minutes.